

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PORT LOUIS 0418

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV PINT MP
SUBJECT: SIGNIFICANCE OF APRIL 24 MAURITIAN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

SUMMARY. THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS TO BE HELD IN THE FIVE PRINCIPAL TOWNS OF MAURITIUS ON APRIL 24 WILL BE A TWO-SIDED CONTEST BETWEEN THE MARXIST-ORIENTED MAURITIAN MILITANT MOVEMENT (MMM) ON THE LEFT AND THE PRESENT GOVERNING COALITION OF THE LABOR PARTY AND THE MAURITIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY (PMSD) REPRESENTING THE CENTER-RIGHT. THE CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN LISTLESS, WITH VERY POOR ATTENDANCE AT PUBLIC RALLIES, CAUSING THE COALITION TO FEAR THAT THERE WILL BE A HIGH ABSTENTION RATE, WHICH WILL HELP THE MMM. THE COALITION IS TELLING THE VOTERS THAT THESE ELECTIONS PROVIDE A "LAST CHANCE" FOR THE MAURITIAN ELECTORATE TO STEM THE DRIFT TOWARD A "COMMUNIST" (MMM) REGIME. THE MMM IS PREDICTING, SOMEWHAT MODESTLY, THAT IT WILL BETTER ITS 38 PERCENT PERFORMANCE IN THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF LAST DECEMBER, WHICH IT IS QUITE LIKELY TO DO. SHOULD THE MMM WIN OUTRIGHT IN MOST OR ALL OF THE TOWNS (IT IS ALREADY CONCEDED VICTORY IN PORT LOUIS, WHERE IT WON ALL 12 ASSEMBLY SEATS IN DECEMBER) ITS DRIVE
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TOWARD TAKING OVER THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT, THROUGH NEW ELECTIONS OR AN ALLIANCE WITH LABOR, WILL RECEIVE A DECIDED BOOST. SHOULD THE COALITION WIN HANDILY, IT WILL BE ENCOURAGED TO TRY ANOTHER ROUND OF NATIONAL ELECTIONS AGAINST THE MMM IN THE HOPE OF "CUTTING IT DOWN TO SIZE." END SUMMARY.

1. ON APRIL 24 VOTERS IN THE FIVE PRINCIPAL TOWNS OF MAURITIUS

-- PORT LOUIS, BEAU BASSIN/ROSE HILL, VACOAS/PHOENIX, QUATRE BORNES AND CUREPIPE -- WILL CHOOSE 126 NEW MUNICIPAL COUNCILLORS. ABOUT 207,000 PEOPLE ARE ELIGIBLE TO VOTE, CONSISTING ABOUT 43 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL NATIONAL ELECTORATE. WHEREAS OVER 90 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE TURNED OUT IN THE DECEMBER 20 ELECTIONS FOR A NEW LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY, SOMEWHERE BETWEEN 50 PERCENT AND 75 PERCENT ARE LIKELY TO VOTE IN SUNDAY'S MUNICIPALS. THE SIZE OF THE ABSTENTION IS LIKELY TO HAVE A DECISIVE INFLUENCE ON THE OUTCOME. THERE ARE ABOUT 260 CANDIDATES IN THE FIELD. IT WILL BE A CONTEST BETWEEN TWO POLITICAL FORCES, THE MARXIST-ORIENTED MAURITIAN MILITANT MOVEMENT (MMM) ON THE LEFT, AND AN ALLIANCE MADE UP OF THE TWO PARTIES NOW FORMING THE RULING GOVERNMENT COALITION-- THE LABOR PARTY AND THE MAURITIAN SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY (PMSD) -- REPRESENTING THE CENTER-RIGHT. SOME OF THE FEW INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES IS LIKELY TO WIN A SEAT.

2. THE COMPOSITION OF THE NEW MUNICIPAL COUNCILS WILL HAVE LITTLE SIGNIFICANCE IN ITSELF, EITHER FOR THE MAURITIAN URBAN DWELLERS OR FOR THE COUNTRY AT LARGE. THE COUNCILS HAVE FEW POWERS OF POLITICAL IMPORT, ARE LARGELY DEPENDENT FOR FUNDS ON THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT, AND MOSTLY OCCUPY THEMSELVES WITH TRYING TO PROVIDE SERVICES TO THE PEOPLE OF THEIR TOWNS. BUT AS WITH THE RECENT MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN FRANCE, THERE IS SERIOUS POLITICAL CONTENT TO THESE ELECTIONS AND THE OUTCOME COULD WELL HAVE A PROFOUND EFFECT ON THE FUTURE POLITICAL ORIENTATION OF THIS COUNTRY.

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3. THESE WILL BE THE FIRST MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN EIGHT YEARS. THE LAST ONES WERE HELD IN 1969, AT A TIME WHEN THE COUNTRY WAS RULED BY A COALITION OF LABOR AND THE PMSD, AS IT IS TODAY. THOSE ELECTIONS WERE WON EASILY BY AN ALLIANCE OF THE TWO PARTIES, WITH THE PMSD PLAYING THE DOMINANT ROLE BECAUSE OF ITS MUCH GREATER STRENGTH AMONG THE URBAN ELECTORATE. IN 1973, AFTER THE LABOR-PMSD COALITION HAD BROKEN UP AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL (THE PMSD WAS BOOTED OUT BY LABOR, WHICH HAD WON THE 1967 ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS AND WAS THE MAJORITY COALITION PARTNER), THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT DISSOLVED THE ELECTED TOWN COUNCILS DOMINATED BY THE PMSD AND REPLACED THEM WITH APPOINTEES. THE PMSD TOWN COUNCILS WERE JUSTIFIABLY ACCUSED OF MALADMINISTRATION, CORRUPTION AND A SHOCKING WASTE OF FUNDS, WHICH HAS HURT THE PMSD'S IMAGE WITH THE VOTERS EVER SINCE.

4. THE DECEMBER ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN THESE FIVE TOWNS WERE NOT WON CONCLUSIVELY BY ANY PARTY. THOUGH THE ASSEMBLY DISTRICTS DO NOT COINCIDE EXACTLY WITH THE MUNICIPAL

BOUNDARIES, IT CAN BE SAID THAT THE MMM SWEPT PORT LOUIS IN DECEMBER, THE PMSD SWEPT CUREPIPE, WHILE LABOR TOOK VACOAS/ PHOENIX EASILY. LABOR WON SLIGHTLY OVER THE MMM IN QUATRE BORNES, AND THE MMM AND THE PMSD SPLIT BEAU BASSIN/ROSE HILL BUT WITH A MARGIN IN FAVOR OF THE MMM. FOR SEVERAL REASONS THE OUTCOME THIS TIME IS NOT LIKELY TO REPEAT THIS PATTERN EXACTLY.

5. TO CONFRONT THE STRONG LEFTIES CHALLENGE POSED BY THE MMM, THE RULING COALITION HAS FORGED AN ALLIANCE TO AVOID SPLITTING THE ANTI-MMM VOTE BETWEEN THEM. WHICHEVER OF THE TWO PARTIES -- LABOR OR THE PMSD-- IS JUDGED THE STRONGER IN A GIVEN WARD CARRIES ITS OWN BANNER AND FIELDS MOST OF THE CANDIDATES, WHILE THE ALLIANCE PARTNER STAYS OUT. THE RESULT IS THAT THE PMSD IS CARRYING THE BURDEN IN PORT LOUIS, CUREPIPE AND BEAU BASSIN, WHILE LABOR IS TAKING THE LEAD IN QUATRE BORNES AND VACOAS. BY COMBINING THEIR
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DECEMBER SUPPORT MATHEMATICALLY THE COALITION SHOULD HAVE NO TROUBLE WINNING THE FOUR UPLAND TOWNS, WHILE CONCEDING PORT LOUIS TO THE MMM. HOWEVER, A STRICT MATHEMATICAL EQUATION WILL NOT WORK, FOR THE LABOR AND THE PMSD VOTERS ARE NOT AS DISCIPLINED AS THOSE OF THE MMM, AND THEY HAVE BEEN FIGHTING AGAINST EACH OTHER SO BITTERLY AND FOR SO LONG THAT A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER OF LABOR AND PMSD VOTERS WILL ABSTAIN OR VOTE MMM RATHER THAN VOTE FOR REPRESENTATIVES OF THE RIVAL ALLIANCE PARTNER. THE OUTCOME IS THEREFORE VERY MUCH IN DOUBT AND HARDLY PREDICTABLE.

6. NO MATTER WHAT THE OUTCOME, IT WILL PROBABLY NOT BE CONSIDERED "INCONCLUSIVE," FOR ALL MAURITIANS ARE AGREED THAT THE RELATIVE STRENGTHS DISPLAYED BY THESE PARTIES (AS IN THE FRENCH CASE RECENTLY) WILL HAVE A PROFOUND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT ON THEIR FUTURE PROSPECTS. THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE BECAUSE THE RULING COALITION TODAY IS HIGHLY UNSTABLE AND ENJOYS ONLY A TWO-SEAT MAJORITY IN THE ASSEMBLY, MAKING NEW ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS A NEAR-TERM PROBABILITY. THE VOTE THAT WILL BE WATCHED CLOSELY IS THAT OF THE MMM. THE PARTY RECEIVED SUPPORT FROM MORE THAN 38 PERCENT OF THE ELECTORATE IN THE DECEMBER ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS. IT SHOULD BETTER THAT RESULT SIMPLY BECAUSE IT IS NOW FACING ONLY ONE OPPONENT -- THE LABOR-PMSD ALLIANCE -- AND IT WILL BENEFIT FROM THE VOTES OF THOSE PMSD PEOPLE WHO CAN'T BRING THEMSELVES TO VOTE LABOR AND THE LABOR PEOPLE WHO REFUSE TO VOTE PMSD. IN ADDITION, IT IS CONCEDED BY ALL THAT THE MMM VOTERS ARE MORE DISCIPLINED AND ARE MORE LIKELY TO TURN OUT IN FULL FORCE TO SUPPORT THE PARTY, WHILE THE SUPPORTERS OF THE OTHER TWO PARTIES ARE MORE APATHETIC AND INCLINED TO STAY HOME IN LARGE NUMBERS. FINANCE MINISTER RINGADOO,

WHO IS DIRECTING THE ALLIANCE CAMPAIGN, HAS STATED FLATLY THAT "OUT ENEMY IS NOT THE MMM, BUT ABSTENTION." IT IS BELIEVED THAT IF THE TURN-OUT REACHES 75 OR 80 PERCENT, THE ALLIANCE SHOULD WIN, EXCEPT IN PORT LOUIS, ALTHOUGH EVEN SO THE MMM WILL BETTER ITS 38 PERCENT PERFORMANCE OF DECEMBER. CONFIDENTIAL

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SHOULD THE MMM BE HELD TO AROUND 40 PERCENT OR LESS OUTSIDE PORT LOUIS, IT WILL BE CONSIDERED A DEFEAT FOR THE MMM, OR AT LEAST A SEVERE PSYCHOLOGICAL BLOW AND A CHECK TO THE MOMENTUM THAT IT HAS BEEN BUILDING SINCE DECEMBER

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7. ON THE OTHER HAND, SHOULD THE MMM WIN THE ELECTIONS BY TAKING A MAJORITY OF THE COUNCIL SEATS IN MOST OR ALL OF THE TOWNS, IT WILL BE CONSIDERED A MOST SERIOUS REVERSAL FOR THE GOVERNING COALITION, TANTAMOUNT TO A REJECTION OF THE COALITION BY THE ELECTORATE, WHICH WILL CALL INOT QUESTION ITS CONTINUED ABILITY TO RULE. THE LABOR PARTY WHICH DOMINATES THE COALITION (HOLDING 28 ASSEMBLY SEATS OUT OF THE COALITION'S 36) WILL THEN BE CONFRONTED WITH THE DIFFICULT CHOICE OF: (A) TRYING TO CARRY ON AS BEFORE; OR (B) GOING TO THE ELECTORATE, WHICH IT WILL HARDLY WISH TO DO FOLLOWING AN ELECTORAL DEFEAT IN THE TOWNS; OR (C) FORMING A COALITION

WITH THE MMM AND SENDING THE SMALL PMSD CONTINGENT INTO
OPPOSITION. DEPENDING ON THE OUTCOME, THE POSSIBILITIES
WILL BE THE SUBJECT OF A SUBSEQUENT ANALYSIS.

8. IF THE MUNICIPAL RESULTS SHOW A DECIDED TREND FAVORING
THE COALITION OR, CONVERSELY, FAVORING THE MMM, PRESSURE
WILL BUILD UP FOR NEW ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS TO EXTEND THE RESULT
TO THE NATIONAL LEVEL. THUS, IF THE COALITION WINS IT
MAY BE ENCOURAGED TO HAVE ANOTHER GO AT THE ELECTORATE
NATIONALLY IN ORDER TO CAPITALIZE ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BLOW
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SUFFERED BY THE MMM TO TRY TO REDUCE MMM REPRESENTATION IN
PARLIAMENT. IF THE MMM WINS IN THE TOWNS, IT WILL NATURALLY
ENERGIZE A CAMPAIGN CALLING INTO QUESTION THE LEGITIMACY
OF THE RULING COALITION AND DEMANDING NEW NATIONAL ELECTIONS
TO RETURN A MMM GOVERNMENT TO POWER. A CLOSE REPETITION OF
THE DECEMBER RESULT WOULD BE CONSIDERED AN "INCONCLUSIVE"
OUTCOME, THAT IS, A MMM VICTORY IN PORT LOUIS, THE MPSD
WINNING EASILY IN CUREPIPE, A LABOR TRIUMPH IN VACOAS, AND
SPLIT DECISIONS IN QUATRE BORNES (BUT WITH A LABOR MAJORITY)
AND IN BEAU BASSIN.

9. BOTH SIDES ARE PREPARING THE ELECTORATE PSYCHOLOGICALLY
FOR WHATEVER UNPREDICTABLE OUTCOME OCCURS. THUS, THE
COALITION IS PITCHING ITS CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE MMM AS A
"COMMUNIST" PARTY, AS IT DID IN DECEMBER, BUT IS CLAIMING
THAT IT IS REALLY FIGHTING ABSTENTION, SO THAT IF IT LOSES
IT WILL BLAME THE LOSS ON THE LOW TURNOUT OF ITS REAL
SUPPORTERS. PAUL BERENGER, LEADER OF THE MMM, HAS INDULGED
IN A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF AMBIGUITY. WHILE AT TIMES CLAIMING
THAT THE MMM WILL WIN A "CRUSHING VICTORY," ON OTHER OCCASIONS
HE HAS TRIED TO PLAY DOWN THE NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE
ELECTIONS AND HAS ACCUSED THE COALITION OF OVERLY POLITICIZING
THEM. SINCE THE MMM IS LIKELY TO BETTER ITS 38 PERCENT
PERFORMANCE OF DECEMBER, IT WILL CLAIM A VICTORY EVEN IF IT
LOSES. PMSD LEADER GAETAN DUVAL AND SOME LABOR CHIEFTAINS
HAVE NOT MINCED WORDS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE THEY ASCRIBE TO
THESE ELECTIONS, DESCRIBING THEM AS THE "LAST CHANCE"
FOR MAURITIANS TO STOP THE DRIFT TOWARD A "COMMUNIST"
REGIME. WHETHER OR NOT THEY BELIEVE IT'S THEIR "LAST CHANCE,"
MAURITIAN VOTERS GENERALLY ARE VIEWING THE MUNICIPALS AS
A SECOND ROUND OF THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE NEW, DYNAMIC
AND LEFTIST MMM AND THE TRADITIONAL PARTIES OF THE PAST,
THIS TIME WITHOUT THE RESTRICTIONS OF THE DOZEN OR SO SMALLER
PARTIES AND LARGE NUMBERS OF INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES. IT IS
PROBABLY TRUE THAT IN MOST VOTERS' MINDS THEY WILL BE VOTING
FOR OR AGAINST THE MMM, THOUGH THE MMM ITSELF HAS TRIED TO
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PRESENT THESE ELECTIONS AS A REFERENDUM ON THE RULING COALITION RATHER THAN ON ITSELF.

10. OTHERS, INCLUDING LABOR SPOKESMAN BOOLELL, HAVE TRIED TO PLAY DOWN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THESE ELECTIONS, BY POINTING OUT THAT ONLY URBAN VOTERS ARE INVOLVED (LABOR'S STRENGTH IS IN THE RURAL AREAS), THAT THEY ARE BEING HELD SO SOON AFTER THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS THAT VOTERS ARE NOT MUCH INTERESTED, AND THAT NATIONAL POLICIES ARE NOT AT STAKE, NOR SHOULD THEY BE, WHEN MUNICIPAL COUNCILS ARE BEING CHOSEN. THESE ARGUMENTS ARE NOT CONVINCING, HOWEVER, AS PRACTICALLY EVERYONE BELIEVES THAT THE MMM WILL BE CONFIRMED AS THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE OR IT WILL BE "CUT DOWN TO SIZE" ONCE AND FOR ALL.

11. AS FOR PERSONALITIES, ONLY ONE PERSON'S IMMEDIATE POLITICAL FUTURE IS AT STAKE: GAETAN DUVAL, PMSD LEADER, IS TRYING TO MAKE A COME-BACK IN CUREPIPE, AFTER HIS RESOUNDING DEFEAT IN AN ADMITTEDLY DIFFICULT DISTRICT IN DECEMBER. IF HE FAILS OF ELECTION HE WILL HAVE TO RETIRE, AND IF HE WINS HE WILL HAVE RE-ESTABLISHED A BASE FROM WHICH TO RELAUNCH HIS CAREER. IF HIS PMSD DOES POORLY IN THESE URBAN ELECTIONS IT IS LIKELY TO DISAPPEAR AS A PARTY, FOR IT IS ALREADY NEARLY NON-EXISTENT IN THE RURAL AREAS. THE LABOR PARTY IS RUNNING ALL NEW, YOUNG AND UNTESTED CANDIDATES. IN DECEMBER MANY OLD FACES OF LABOR WENT DOWN TO DEFEAT, WHILE NEW PEOPLE USUALLY LED THE FIELD. SOME LABOR STARS SUCH AS RINGADOO, BOOLELL AND YOUSOUF MOHAMED HAVE BEEN LEADING THE PUBLIC CAMPAIGN, ALONG WITH DUVAL, ON BEHALF OF THE COALITION AND WOULD NOT BE HELPED BY A DEFEAT, WHILE OTHERS SUCH AS RAMGOOLAM, WALTER AND GHURBURRUN HAVE PRETTY MUCH STAYED ON THE SIDELINES (OR ABROAD). THE MMM IS RUNNING A GOOD MANY OF ITS LEADING LIGHTS IN THE VARIOUS TOWNS, INCLUDING BERENGER, BHAYAT, DE L'ESTRAC, BAPPOO, JUDDOO, BIZLALL AND CZIFFRA, PLUS A LARGE NUMBER WHO WON ASSEMBLY SEATS IN DECEMBER, AND IT WOULD NOT BE GOOD FOR THE PARTY'S IMAGE IF MANY OF THESE PERSONS WERE DEFEATED.

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12. SOME ANTI-MMM PEOPLE ARE TEMPTED TO LET THE MMM WIN AT LEAST SOME OF THE MUNICIPALITIES, IN THE CONVICTION THAT HAVING RESPONSIBILITY FOR RUNNING SOMETHING WILL MODERATE THEIR VIEWS AND MAKE THEM MORE REALISTIC, AND MAY EVEN CAUSE THEM TO FALL ON THEIR FACES, WHICH WOULD BE ALL TO THE GOOD. OTHERS ARE NOT TEMPTED TO TAKE THAT CHANCE, STRESSING INSTEAD THAT THE REAL DANGER IS THAT THE MMM

WILL TAKE OVER THE GOVERNMENT AND REVOLUTIONIZE MAURITIAN SOCIETY, WITH A VICTORY IN THE MUNICIPALS PROVIDING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BOOST THAT WILL SOFTEN UP THE ELECTORATE FOR A MMM TRIUMPH IN THE NEXT ROUND OF NATIONAL ELECTIONS. THE LATTER SCHOOL IS UNWILLING TO ALLOW THE MMM TO TAKE POWER AT ALL, OUT OF FEAR THAT ONCE IN POWER THEY WILL NEVER LET GO AND IT WILL BE IMPOSSIBLE TO DISLODGE THEM. GAETAN DUVAL, FOR EXAMPLE, SAYS: "IN FRANCE IT'S DIFFERENT. IF THE LEFT WINS THE NEXT ELECTIONS THERE, IT IS NOT NECESSARILY PERMANENT. HERE IT WOULD BE."

13. THE CAMPAIGN ITSELF HAS BEEN LISTLESS AND DULL, WITH VERY POOR ATTENDANCE AT PUBLIC RALLIES, BY COMPARISON WITH DECEMBER. THIS HAS BEEN AS TRUE FOR THE MMM AS FOR THE COALITION, BUT IT IS BELIEVED THAT THE MMM HAS BEEN WORKING OVERTIME WITH DOOR-TO-DOOR CAMPAIGNING AND MOBILIZATION OF ITS GRASS-ROOTS "BASE." THE COALITION IS RIGHT TO WORRY ABOUT ABSTENTIONS. THE MAURITIAN VOTER SEEMS TO BE INDIFFERENT, NOT CARING MUCH WHO RUNS THE TOWNS, OR PERHAPS BELIEVING THAT IT DOESN'T MAKE MUCH DIFFERENCE WHO DOES. HOWEVER, THEY DO CARE ABOUT WHO RUNS THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT, AND IF TH COALITION'S CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN EFFECTIVE IN CONVINCING THE VOTERS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OUTCOME OF THE MUNICIPALS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY, THEY WILL TURN OUT IN GOOD NUMBERS ON SUNDAY, AS THEY DID IN DECEMBER. HOW THEY VOTE COULD WELL DETERMINE THE FUTURE VIABILITY OF THE PRESENT GOVERNING COALITION, AND BY THE SAME TOKEN THE CHANCES OF THE MAURITIAN MILITANT MOVEMENT COMING TO POWER
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